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ABSTRACT

In 2000, an Idea Brief asserted that the best way to improve education would be to give every schoolchild the opportunity to attend a middle class public school (economic school integration). This brief reviews recent research and policy developments regarding economic school integration, noting that school segregation based on socioeconomic status is increasing. Many communities are turning to economic integration as a way to preserve successful racial integration programs without running afoul of constitutional prohibitions against race in student assignment. Economic integration generally produces considerable racial integration as a byproduct. This brief presents a sample of communities that are using socioeconomic integration. The number of students attending public schools with economic integration plans has jumped from 20,000 in 1999 to more than 400,000 in 2002. Early results suggest that economic school integration can be very successful. Research shows that test scores are rising and dropout rates are declining, despite a relatively high poverty rate in the districts. Some studies indicate that low-income students will do better in majority middle-class schools than they will in high-poverty schools. This is mainly due to the influence of peers, more active and influential parents, and the best qualified teachers. (Contains 33 endnotes.) (SM)

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Economic School Integration: An Update

By Richard D. Kahlenberg

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Economic School Integration:
An Update

By Richard D. Kahlenberg

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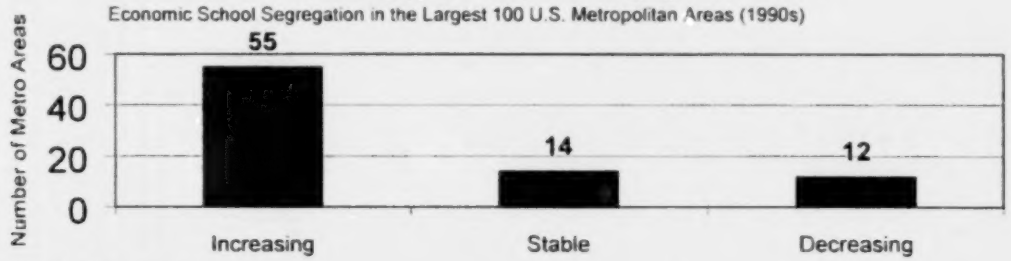
THE IDEA

In February 2000, The Century Foundation published an idea brief on Economic School Integration (http://www.policyideas.org/Issues/Education/School_Integration.pdf), which argued that the best way to improve education would be to give every American schoolchild the chance to attend a middle-class public school. This Idea Brief provides an update of the substantial research and policy developments that have occurred over the intervening two and half years. The number of students attending public schools with economic integration plans has jumped from roughly 20,000 in 1999 to more than 400,000 today. (By comparison, the number of students attending private schools with publicly funded vouchers remains at about 14,000.) [1] And a growing number of research studies published in the past few years make the case for economic integration of schools even stronger than before.

THE PROBLEM

Economic school segregation is increasing. According to research conducted by David Rusk for The Century Foundation, economic school segregation increased in the 1990s in 55 of the largest 100 metropolitan areas, was stable in 14, and lessened in 12 (with data unavailable in 19) (See figure 1). These trends are consistent with Harvard professor Gary Orfield's research finding that American schools are resegregating by race.[2]

Figure 1: Increasing Economic School Segregation



N.B. Data unavailable for 19 areas.

Source: David Rusk, "Trends in School Segregation," Background paper for The Report of The Century Foundation Task Force on the Common School, *Divided We Fail: Coming Together through Public School Choice* (Century Foundation Press, 2002).

The problem is likely to get worse in the future. In coming years, more school desegregation orders are likely to come to an end, with districts returning to a system of "neighborhood schools" that reflect economic and racial segregation. Rusk's study projects that economic school segregation will increase in all but six states between now and 2025.

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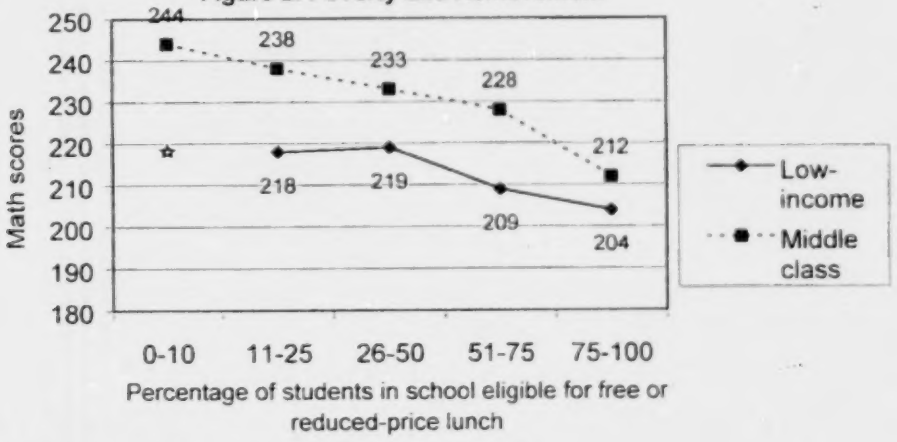
Poverty concentrations present an enormous problem for educators. According to the U.S. Department of Education, all children, poor and middle class, perform substantially worse in schools with concentrations of poverty. Indeed, middle class children attending high poverty schools (those with more than 75% low income) perform worse, on average, than low income children attending middle class schools. On the 4th grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) math test, for example, low income students attending schools with a majority of middle class student body score higher on average (219) than middle class children attending high poverty schools (212). (See figure 2).

Figure 2: Poverty and Achievement



Source: U.S. Department of Education, "The Condition of Education," 2002.
Low-income defined as eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, middle-class as not eligible. Math scores are average scale scores of public school students in 4th-grade mathematics on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2000.

How Plans Work

In recent years, economic school integration plans have been adopted in an increasing number of school districts. At the end of the twentieth century, only a few small districts were explicitly pursuing economically integrated schools – places like La Crosse, Wisconsin (7600 students)[3]; Manchester, Connecticut (7800 students);[4] and South Orange-Maplewood, New Jersey (6400 students).[5] In the past two and a half years, a growing number of districts, some of them fairly large in size, have adopted such plans.

Communities are motivated in part because new state and federal accountability schemes require significant achievement gains, advances these communities believe are impossible to accomplish with economically segregated schools. In addition, a number of communities turned to economic integration as a way to preserve successful racial integration programs without running afoul of constitutional prohibitions against using race in student assignment. Economic integration plans generally produce a fair amount of racial integration as a byproduct, but don't raise the legal concerns that using race per se can entail.

What follows is a sampling of communities that are using socioeconomic integration. The list is not exhaustive, but it is relevant to note that more than 400,000 students attend schools in just the districts listed.

- **Wake County (Raleigh), North Carolina.** In January 2000, the Wake County school board adopted a plan to replace a system under which each school would have between 15% and 45% minority populations with an economic integration plan, under which no school should have more than 40% of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch and no school should have more than 25% of students below grade level. The district has 101,000 students.[6]
- **Coweta County, Georgia.** In February 2000, the Coweta County school board voted to rezone seven of the district's 15 elementary schools in order to achieve a greater balance of low income children.

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The Atlanta Constitution-Journal lauded the "moral courage" of the move, which was based "on research that shows low income students fare much better when mixed with wealthier, higher-achieving students." The district has 18,000 students.[7]

- **St. Lucie County, Florida.** In January 2001, the St. Lucie School Board modified its controlled choice plan of student assignment to emphasize socioeconomic diversity over diversity by race. Under the new system, parents are asked whether the family qualifies for food stamps and whether the children qualify for free and reduced price lunch. The districts has 31,000 students.[8]
- **San Francisco, California.** In April 2001, the San Francisco school board adopted a new student assignment plan that replaced a racial desegregation scheme with one that seeks socioeconomic diversity. The district now uses a seven-part definition, including Socioeconomic Status (has the student participated in free/reduced lunch; Calworks, or public housing?); Academic Achievement (has student scored below 30th percentile on Stanford 9?); Mothers Educational Background (post high school education?); Student's Language Status (limited or non-English proficient?); Quality of Student's Prior School (lowest ranking in CA Academic Performance Index?); Student's Home Language (other than English?); and Residence in Different Geographic Area. The system has 60,000 students.[9]
- **Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina.** In August, 2001, the Charlotte board of education, under legal pressure, voted to drop a longstanding racial desegregation plan, and implemented a controlled choice plan which allows parents to rank preferences among schools, and gives a preference to students who are eligible for free and reduced price lunch whose home school free and reduced lunch numbers are 30 percentage points above the district average. A priority is also given for low income students "where their choice would enhance the free and reduced lunch status but not create a concentration of free-reduced lunch status above 50 percent in the receiving school." Beginning in 2004–2005, a priority is also given where the student reads below grade level and the home school performs 10 percentage points below the district average for reading. The goal is to ensure that "schools don't have a concentration of low-income students or students who perform below grade level." Charlotte-Mecklenburg has 108,000 students.[10]
- **Greenville, South Carolina.** In late 2001, the Greenville school board voted to adopt a new student assignment scheme which eliminated the use of race but sought to reduce the "concentration of low-income students" and the "concentration of low-achieving students." The board rejected, however, a more aggressive plan to ensure that no school has more than 50% of its students eligible for free or reduced price lunch. Greenville has 61,000 students.[11]
- **Brandywine, Delaware.** In November, 2001, the school district backed a flexible student assignment plan which would keep all schools between 16% and 47% low income, as opposed to a neighborhood assignment plan which would have increased ranges from 6%–73% low income. The district cited extensive research that students would have suffered under the neighborhood school plan that would have elevated levels of concentrated poverty. In March 2002, the Delaware State Board of Education approved Brandywine's non-neighborhood assignment plan as a justified exception to a state law generally favoring neighborhood schools. Brandywine has 10,000 students.[12]
- **Cambridge, Massachusetts.** In December 2001, the Cambridge school committee voted to amend its public school choice program to require that all public schools fall within a plus or minus 15 percentage point range of the districtwide percentage of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch (40%). In the second year of the plan, the range will be reduced to 10 percentage points and in the third year, to five percentage points. Cambridge has 7300 students.[13]

Today, a number other communities are currently discussing the possibility of socioeconomic school integration, including Lee County (Ft. Myers), Florida,[14] Jefferson County (Louisville), Kentucky,[15] Lynn, Massachusetts,[16] Rochester, New York,[17] and Seattle, Washington.[18] In addition, under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, all school districts nationally are required to allow students to transfer to better performing

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public schools within the district. A priority is given to low income and low achieving students, so the policy serves, in effect, as a modest but national program of economic and academic desegregation.

The most successful economic integration plans rely on public school choice rather than coerced busing. In Cambridge, for example, all 15 elementary schools in the district have distinctive programs, offering parents a chance to ranks their preferences. School officials then honor choices with an eye to economic school integration.[19]

Evidence that the Idea Works

The early results suggest that economic school integration can be very successful. In La Crosse, which has the longest running plan, test scores have risen, and the district has a very low dropout rate, despite having a relatively high poverty rate.[20] In Wake County, nearly 90% of students performed at or above grade level on the most recent set of state tests.[21]

Of course, some high poverty schools have managed to be successful, but they are very rare. In December, 2001, the Education Trust published a study which purported to find some 3,592 high poverty schools that achieve at high levels, but a reanalysis of the data by Economic Policy Institute researcher Douglas Harris found in fact that students in high poverty schools perform much less well than students in more affluent schools, particularly when one looks at performance over a period of years. Using the Education Trust definition of a high performing school (scoring in the top third of the state in either reading or math) Harris noted that there are more than 21,000 low performing high poverty schools. Whereas 18% of high poverty schools are high performing, 55% of low poverty schools are -- three times the rate of success. Because test scores fluctuate year to year, so that individual years can represent a large number of "flukes," Harris sought to look at which schools have sustained success -- for two years, in two grade levels, in two subjects. Under that definition, he found that just 1% of high poverty schools are consistently high performing, compared to 24% of low poverty schools; that is, high poverty schools are twenty four times less likely to be consistently successful than low poverty schools.[22]

None of this means that "poor kids can't learn." In the past couple of years, a number of new local and national studies have found that low income students (as well as middle class students) do better in majority middle class schools than they do in high poverty schools. Among the examples:

- In a study of fourth grade students in Madison-Dane County, Wisconsin schools published in July, 2002, researcher David Rusk found that for every 1% increase in middle class classmates, low income students improved 0.64 percentage points in reading and 0.72 percentage points in math. For a given low income student, this meant the difference between attending a school with a 45% middle class student body and one with 85% middle class classmates on average meant "a 20 to 32 percentage point improvement in that low-income pupil's test scores." Rusk found that middle class children saw a decline in test scores as the percentage of low income classmates increased, but that the rate of decline "was less than half the rate of improvement for low income pupils." Moreover, using census data, he found that this decline in majority middle class schools may very well have been a result not of classmate influences but of the fact that "middle class" students in economically mixed schools were not as well off as "middle class" students in affluent schools. (The range of "middle class" included all those above the 30th percentile in income.) By contrast, low income students were more uniformly low income across schools. Once schools passed a 60% low income threshold, both low income and middle class scores declined significantly.[23]
- In a study of third, fourth and fifth grade students in Denver, Colorado schools published in May 2002 by the Piton Foundation, Dianne Lefly, research manager of the Denver public Schools Assessment and Testing Department, found that low income students perform at much higher levels in majority middle class schools than in majority poor schools. Some 53-54% of low income students attending schools where less than 50% of the classmates were low income had proficient or advanced reading scores on the Colorado Student Assessment Program, while only 33% had such scores in high poverty schools (those with 75% of more of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch.) Middle class

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children in such high poverty schools had lower passing rates (49%) than low income children in middle class schools (53-54%).[24]

- In a study of 50,000 students in third through eighth grade in Montgomery County, Maryland schools published in September 2001, *The Washington Post* found that "the overall performance of individual students differed dramatically depending upon the overall level of poverty in the school they attended. Lower income students performed their worst at schools where the student population was overwhelmingly poor. But when lower-income students attended schools where most of the students were more affluent, they achieved higher scores -- matching or exceeding the county average."[25]
- In a study of students in Escambia County Florida using data from the 2000 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, school district evaluation specialist Linda Harageones told the *Pensacola News Journal* in May 2002 that "low-income children posted higher scores at schools where the majority of students came from working- or middle-class homes than they did where more than 60 percent of students were poor enough to qualify for the federal free lunch program." [26]

It is important to note that these individual studies do not control for possible "self-selection" bias. It may be that low income students in middle class schools come from particularly motivated families, who took extraordinary steps to ensure that their children attended middle class schools. But a large number of studies have controlled for this bias by looking longitudinally at achievement growth over time -- or by comparing similarly motivated "winners" and "losers" in lotteries to attend middle class schools -- and a strong residual effect has been found.[27]

Why do all students perform better in middle class schools than in high poverty schools? Most studies center around the influence of peers, parents, and teachers. A number of studies over several years have found that middle class schools are marked by more motivated and well behaved peers, more active and influential parents, and by the very best qualified teachers.[28] Among the most recent findings:

- **Peers.** In a new study of Texas students, Harvard professor Caroline Hoxby found that there was a positive peer influence associated with being in classes with high achievers. Using new techniques which seek to screen out self-selection bias (that motivated students are likely to seek out motivated peers), Hoxby found that being surrounded by peers who score one point higher raises an individual student's score by between .10 and .55 points. Black students were more affected by peers than white students, she found.[29]
- **Parents.** Parents are an important part of the larger school community because they can volunteer in class, push for high expectations, and ensure adequate resources. Most studies find that poor children are more expensive to educate on average than middle class children, but students in high poverty schools get less, not more. According to a new study from the Education Trust, children living in the quartile of districts with the largest number of poor students receive about $1,000 less per pupil than children living in the quartile with the smallest number of poor students ($5,846 vs. $6,812).[30]
- **Teachers.** Teachers leave high poverty schools at much higher rates than they do middle class schools. According to a study conducted by the University of Pennsylvania's Richard M. Ingersoll, 20% of teachers left high poverty schools in 1999, while 12.9% of teachers left low poverty schools.[31] In another study, conducted for the Education Trust, Ingersoll found that 34% of teachers in American secondary schools teach out of their field of expertise in high poverty schools, compared to 19% in low poverty schools.[32] A study published in November 2001 by Eric A. Hanushek, John F. Kain, and Steven Rifkin found that teachers tend to move to schools with fewer minority and low income students. To attract teachers to high poverty and high minority schools, the authors estimate that schools would have to pay a salary premium of 20-50%. Commenting on the study, Harvard's Richard Murnane said even providing such premiums for teaching in high poverty schools may be unsuccessful; "Paying people extra money to do an impossible job doesn't work."[33]

Rather than fighting these odds, a growing number of districts are seeking to make all their schools solidly middle class, thereby improving achievement and helping close the achievement gap simultaneously.

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More Information

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September 16, 2002

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